Medievalism and Apocalypticism in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring der Nibelungen*

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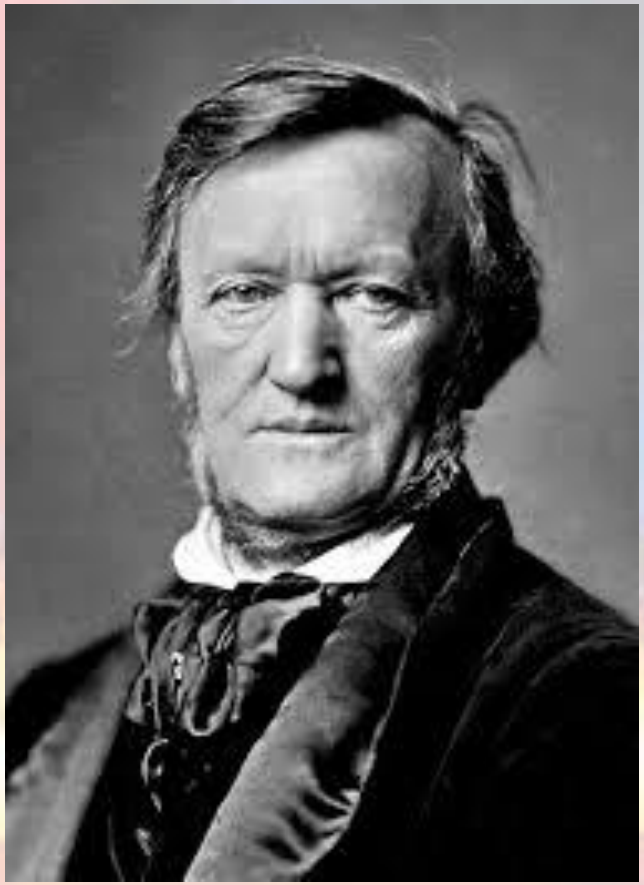
Wagner and Medieval Sources: An Obsession

- Richard Wagner (1813-1883) wrote thirteen complete operas, including the four that comprised *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876). Overwhelmingly, the operas were based on medieval sources (*Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Rienzi*), with two dating to the sixteenth century (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Das Liebesverbot*), with only two based on later sources (*Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Die Feen*).
- While medievalism infuses Wagner's oeuvre, only the *Ring* Cycle and (arguably) *Parsifal* are apocalyptic. The *Ring* traces the triumph and downfall of the gods and is an example of "mythic medievalism" (Eichner 2020). Wagner thought history was a narrative of decline and that an apocalyptic event could transform society, but his youthful hopes for revolution were dashed.
- The *Ring's* world is spoiled by Alberich's theft of the gold, Mime's creation of the ring and tarnhelm, and Wotan's theft of the magical objects. In this paper I discuss the varied apocalypses that can be realized in productions of the *Ring*, and the how the impact or success of the production reduces or enhances the medievalism of Wagner's operatic cycle.

Medievalism and Wagner 1

- Wagner's epic operatic tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (henceforth the *Ring*) is a nineteenth century romantic work, which incorporates a range elements of medieval Germanic mythology into its narrative.
- In the *Ring* Wagner modernized medieval myths in a manner relevant to his nineteenth century public. The libretto combines sources from Norse mythology (the *Poetic Edda*, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*), Icelandic heroic sagas (*Völsunga Saga*, *Thidreks Saga*), Middle High German epic (*The Nibelungenlied*), and early modern ballads (*Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*).
- See Stanley R. Hauer, "Wagner and the Völospá," *19th-Century Music*, 15, no. 1 (1991): 52-63.



Medievalism and Wagner 2

- Medievalism refers to "how and why various individuals and institutions have chosen to engage with the Middle Ages," and it is acknowledged that very different motives may inspire, and outcomes may result, from such engagement (Emery, "Medievalism and the Middle Ages," 2009, 78).
- Medieval Norse texts functioned as a prism through which feelings and actions in the world might be comprehended. Wagner made changes to the sources, due to his conviction that the stories therein embodied universally applicable insights.
- The *Ring* is a representation of the 'Pagan' Middle Ages, through which Wagner treats the theme of the passing of the world of the gods and the dawn of the era of humanity (secularisation). Arguably, *Parsifal* is a vision of the 'Christian' Middle Ages in which Wagner explores values including monarchy, loyalty, chivalry, ad religion.

Wagner, Romanticism and Ritual

- Wagner promoted the contemporary relevance of Norse mythology for the nineteenth century, which meant that it was presented in a Romantic manner. Romanticism is a complex historical and cultural movement, beginning in the eighteenth century as a reaction to the Enlightenment.
- The Romantic may involve, but is not exhausted by, phenomena such as “a love of the exotic, a revolt from Reason, an exaggeration of individualism, a liberation of the unconscious, a reaction against scientific method, a revival of pantheism … a rejection of artistic preferences, a preference for emotion, [and] a movement back to nature” (Barzun, *Classic, Romantic, and Modern* 1961, 13).
- Wagner conceived the *Ring* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), and as Jonathan Carr has observed, he had “some original ideas about how this colossus should be displayed; over four evenings before an audience that did not have to pay, and in a wooden building designed along the lines of a Greek theatre, which would be burned down after the last night.”

The Ring as Ritual and Transformation

- The *Ring* is structured as a *Bühnenfestspiel* (stage festival play) with a prelude (*Das Rheingold*) followed by three days of music dramas (*Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*).
- It tells the story of the origin and rise of the gods led by Wotan, and their decline and extinction as the age of humanity comes to pass.

Eschatology and Apocalypticism

- Eschatology: ‘last things’, theories and ideas surrounding the final days or the end times.
- Apocalypse – ‘revelation’, revealing new knowledge of eschatological matters.
- Wagner’s revolutionary politics (he joined the Young German Movement in 1849) and was exiled for 11 years after taking part in street protests) declined into conservativism in later years.

The Revolutionary Ring

- “Wagner’s tale of the corrupting power of the golden Ring matches Marx’s musings on the ‘perverting power’ of money. When, in *Das Kapital*, Marx speaks of the hoarding of commodities, he notes that the hoarder ‘sacrifices the lusts of the flesh to his gold fetish’ and adopts ‘the gospel of renunciation’. The word Marx uses here, *Entsagung*, is the same that Wagner applies to the dwarf Alberich’s renunciation of love – the gesture that wins him access to the Rhinegold. For Marx and Wagner alike, love and power are irreconcilable”.
- “Alexander Herzen endorsed Wagner’s revolutionary writings, though not his music. The most committed Wagnerite among Marx’s contemporaries was Ferdinand Lassalle, the founder of the General German Workers’ Association party. Flamboyant, charismatic, fond of silk dressing gowns, prone to scandalous affairs, Lassalle was more than a little Wagnerian himself. After reading the libretto of the *Ring*, he wrote: ‘I am still in endless excitement like a foaming sea, and days and weeks will pass before I can concentrate the soul sufficiently undivided upon the arid statistical and economic investigations to which my next period is devoted’.”
- Alex Ross, “Richard and the Revolutionaries: Why did Lefties Love Wagner?”, *The Guardian*, 17 September 2020. At: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/sep/17/why-did-lefties-love-wagner-alex-ross-wagnerism-revolution-hitler.

Otto Schenk at the Met Opera: Twenty Years

- “Viennese director Otto Schenk. When it was first introduced to the Met, opening with *Die Walküre* in 1987, the production must have been astonishing, with epic set changes to match the scale of the music, its romantic mountain and forest settings, and its technological wizardry. In the digital age such tricks no longer astound, and the set itself is said to be ready to actually implode – as opposed to - theatrically implode, as it does at the end of *Götterdämmerung*” (Pilkington 2009).
- Conductor James Levine, Wotan sung by James Morris, both there for the full 20 years. I saw this production with Donald Barrett in 2009, the year it was retired.

Medievalism Triumphant: Schenk

First Apocalypse: Patrice Chereau, 1976-1980

- In 1974, Wolfgang Wagner secured Pierre Boulez as conductor and Patrice Chereau to realise the *Ring* to mark the centenary of the Bayreuth Festival.
- Audiences were subjected to an operatic treatise on the tendency for power to corrupt set against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution.
- Chereau "evoked a nineteenth-century dreamscape: gods, giants, dwarves and mermaids in dinner jackets and petticoats scheme against the backdrop of steel dams and massive cogwheels. Traditionally, critics have seen this production as a continuation of the Marxist legacy of George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). Viewed instead as an early representative of steampunk, the social critique, environmental concerns, and retro-futuristic ideas featured in this staging become contextualised within a coherent framework - one that explores contemporary social and technological anxieties through the metaphor of an epic fantasy world" (Carmel Raz).

The Industrial Revolution as Apocalypse

The Second Apocalypse: Francesca Zambello

- Zambello's 'American' Ring had: the Valkyries arrive by parachute dressed like Amelia Earhart; Mime raises Siegfried in a trailer surrounded by garbage; the Wanderer is a homeless vagabond with a sleeping bag; Fafner the dragon guarding the ring, lives in an abandoned warehouse and operates a huge, clanking tank with searchlights and terrifying steel claws; and the Norns are telephone or computer technicians surrounded by cables.
- She foregrounds disaster capitalism, the destruction of the environment, the hubristic exploitation of natural resources by humans, the need for female empowerment, and the question of who will inherit the spoiled earth we have created. This is a feminist *Ring* in which Brünnhilde gifts the world to Gutrune.

Medievalism Dormant, Apocalypticism Rampant

EPA

The Third Apocalypse: Stefan Herheim

- “Herheim’s staging attempts to give a voice back to the voiceless, or at least to make us in the audience think about what those voices might say if they were given a means to be listened to. Set up metatheatrically as a play-within-a-play, the production sees a group of refugees attempt to regain agency in their lives by putting on the Ring, leading to an exploration of power, freedom and love conducted through the control of scenic and musical progression by Wagner’s characters and the refugee actors playing them.”
- “As a metaphor for power though, it was artistic control of music that would standout the most throughout the cycle. The grand piano seen in the first scene would remain a constant on stage throughout the four operas, and beginning with Fricka and Freia ascending from it at the start of scene two, was frequently the means by which characters entered and exited the stage. If Wotan playing the first note had been an indication that he was “in charge” at the start of the piece, then Alberich taking a trumpet instead of some gold seemed to represent the fact that he was now dictating events. Starting with Loge during his explanation of the value of the gold and the ring, and continuing with Alberich during the descent into Nibelheim, various characters also sat at the piano and played along with the music, sometimes even miming other people’s lines, as if it were their turn to be in control. The idea that none of these characters (or actors) really did have power though, was suggested by the way in which Mime and Wotan read from a copy of the score, perhaps indicating that they (and we) were all bound to some extent by the conventions, rules, and expectations laid out for us by those previously in charge.
- “*Die Walküre* opened in a hut constructed from suitcases and introduced a new figure into the proceedings, one that on initial viewing I thought might simply have been a metaphorical embodiment of Sieglinde’s inner turmoil. The programme notes would reveal it to be this, but also a real adolescent child of Hunding and Sieglinde. That her killing of the child, upon Siegmund’s drawing of Nothung from the tree (or in this case, the grand piano), then represented an extreme form of liberation from the trauma of her forced marriage was clear, although it had the side effect, intended or otherwise of making Sieglinde a less sympathetic character, and her union with Siegmund less celebratory.” At: https://www.wagneropera.net/articles/articles-berlin-2024-herheim-ring-goodyear.htm

Displaced, Destitute People Tell Stories

The Ring is Us: The Ring is Now & It Is the End

- “The dead son of Hunding and Sieglinde returned, along with other refugees playing fallen heroes, during the opening of Act III, during which the Valkyries would defend both themselves and Sieglinde from them. The fact that the men undressed to their underwear suggested the threat both of demons from the past and also of sexual violence.
- Erda emerged not from the piano but from the prompter’s box in Act III (as she had also done in Das Rheingold), which fit nicely with her role as the omniscient earth mother. Alberich watched on amused for much of the scene, including when Erda was strangled by the Wanderer. Rather than simply being a brutal, final dismissal of the old order, Herheim suggests in his programme notes that the God’s summoning of her represents an attempt to reestablish male dominance. Such an interpretation would then make the motive for the murder explicit misogyny, an intensification of the threat of sexual violence towards (migrant?) women that had been hinted at in *Die Walküre*.
- Gunther and Gutrune were also dressed as opera guests, the former appearing in blue blazer like a middle-ranking functionary. Following Siegfried’s arrival from the piano (played by Hagen), champagne proved the catalyst for his interest in Gutrune, who appeared worried by his advances and fled into the arms of Hagen.
- So, what did I actually make of all that? Well, let me start by saying that purely in terms of its stagecraft, the production only confirmed my long-standing opinion that Stefan Herheim is the greatest opera director in the world”.
- Sam Goodyear reviews Stefan Herheim's production of Der Ring des Nibelungen at Deutsche Oper, Berlin. At: https://www.wagneropera.net/articles/articles-berlin-2024-herheim-ring-goodyear.htm

Some Concluding Thoughts

- Wagner clearly thought that his operas could play the role of religion/ philosophy/ meaning making in secularised modernity. His narrative considered extremes of power, honour, love, nihilism, and the sense of an ending that he thought characteristic of his century.
- The medievalist aesthetics of productions of the *Ring* since 1876, and the mythic and archetypal significance that the cycle has acquired in popular discourse, along with the ritual dimensions of attending performances of the Ring worldwide, made it one of the most significant sites of aesthetic medievalism in the modern world.
- Attendance at the *Ring* has often been highlighted as an example of spiritual tourism or secular pilgrimage, and recent scholarship has developed the notion that artworks, both exhibited in museums and galleries (building that are in certain ways reminiscent of temples and sacred spaces) and as performances, frequently take on a spiritual quality for modern secular individuals.
- Since Patrice Chereau's ground-breaking production for Bayreuth in 1976, the apocalyptic has outweighed the medievalism in presenting the *Ring* to contemporary audiences. Arguably, we are in an End Times, if not the End Times, and the bleakness of such presentations makes the demanding operatic form appealing to some who would have scorned the Tolkienesque, high fantasy version of the *Ring* which dominated world stages from 1876 to 1976.